Total Quality Management
and the System Safety Secretary

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Abstract

The system safet y secretary is a valuable member of the system safety team. As downsizing occurs to meet economic constraints, the Total Quality Management (TQM) approach is frequently adopted as a formula for success and, in some. cases, for survival. Government agencies and private industries alike are caught in a rapidly chang ing environment. The system safely community is faced with the challenge of balancing an increasing task load, decreasing staff, and responsibility for a consistent, uncompromised product: safety. In meeting this challenge, all available resources must be fully utilized.

As an office technology professional, the secretary 's input can be vital to the total team approach. With empowerment, the secretary can accomplish many safety non-tra ditional tasks, allowing the engineer to better utilize his/her time and talents. With training and experience, the transition to system safety paraprofessional is an attainable and necessary goal.

A six-step exercise begins the process of including the. secretary as a member of the team. Areas of system safety trainin g are suggested, most of which require mini mum effort on the part of the engineering staff. Empowerment and non-traditional secretarial tasks are discussed. The TQM concept is explained, while the total team approach is incorporated in all areas. TQM advantages arc presented.

Introduction

Jet Propulsion laboratory (J])],) is a world-renowned scientific institution engaged in exciting, projects of great technical and organizational significance. In 1992, the JPL Executive Council embarked on the. Total Quality Management (TQM) Initiative with a firm commitment to embedding the TQM attitudes in the diverse JPL culture,

Why does JPL, with a reputation for excellence, need TQM? Because, just a s government agencies and other private. industries, we too are caught in a time of economic constraint and a rapidly changing environment. In order to meet this challen ge, we too must improve and, more importantly, fully utilize our existing resources. The TQM approach applies to one-of-a-kind organizations such as JPL, as it dots to every other ag ency and industry seeking to maintain a high standard of excellence.

TQM is a vital force in assuring that, although the external environment continues to change., we will be held in high regard by our customers, our competitors and ourselves, (Ref. 1)

What is Total Quality Management (TQM)?

Total Quality Management (TQM) -- buzz phrase of the 90's or a formula for success? Volumes of text have been written in an attempt to define the. TQM philosophy and approach. Yet, one simple definition seems to capture it all. Total Quality Management is "doing the right things right." (Ref. 1) It is a common sense attitude, embracing a total team approach, employing all available resources to accomplish target tasks and goals while maintaining a high standard of excellence in everything we do.

TQM, by nature, is an ongoing process of introspection, improve.mcmt, and change. By definition, TQM utilizes the resources of each and every member of the organizational team. Traditional boundaries are broken as teammates begin to interact, working together toward common goals. Management hierarchy fades as we all bc.come. managers of our own contributions to the team. The very structure of an organization changes as the Total Quality Commit ment takes hold.

TQM and the Secretary

Do secretaries care. about Total Quality Management? One recent survey indicates that they do. At the 1993 Professional Secretaries International® Convention in Columbus, Ohio, 66-/ secretaries participate in a survey regarding the TQM concept. The survey indicated that 429 respondents were concerned about quality in their organizations. A majority of respondents indicated they had suggestions for i mprovements at the.ir workplace.s. However, only 97 respondents felt their suggestions were like.ly to be implemented. (Ref. 2)

Can secretaries initiate positive change, i mprove processes, and increase productivity y? Should they be included as a member of the. team? 1 :mphatically, yes!

A qualified secretary is an office technology professional. He/she is trained and experienced to fully support the efforts of any given industry. Some arc qualified by formal education, some. by an on-the-job apprenticeship and mentoring.. Others have carnal the Certified Professional Secretary® (CPS) rating by passing an rigorous series of examinations. (Ref. 2) It is not unusual to find qualified secretaries with college degrees in a variety of disciplines such as english, business or economics. Sorer. become paraprofessionals in a specific area in order to provide specialized support services.

Yet, the qualified secretary i s far too often ignored. Abilities are underestimated and the secretary is typecast into an antiquate.d traditional role. Skills arc. not utilized, contributions are not solicited, and growth is not encouraged. Consequently, a valuable resource is wasted.

The Total Quality Manage.mmt approach breaks this traditional typecast. As a vital member of the team, the qualified secretary contributes his/her expertise in a variety of dive]-sc, non-traditional ways. Office technology skills as well as individual abilities are recognized and employed. A valuable, resource is recovered.

4.1). ?.?

Is Your Secretary a Member of the System Safety Team?

In this era of downsizing and economic constraint, the System Safety community is faced with the challenge of balancing an increased task load, a decreasing staff, and the responsibility for a consistent, uncompromised product: safety. Are you utilizing all available resources? Is your secretary a member of the System Safety team?

Ideally, your organization has initiated a Total Quality Management plan that encourages a total team approach. However, some plans are implemented by a "trickle-down" method that can take some time to reach individual areas of the organization. Even progressive multifaceted plans take time to fully implement. Regardless of your organization's progress or commitment, the TQM approach can be effected in your System Safety office without delay. An organizational TQM plan is not essential to include your secretary as a member of the team. The following six step process is specifically designed for the System Safety office, independent of organizational goals yet generically compatible. with most TQM plans.

The Six-Step Process

The six-step process encourages the total team approach within the Sytem Safety office and specifically integrates the secretary as a member of the System Safety team. (Fig. 1)
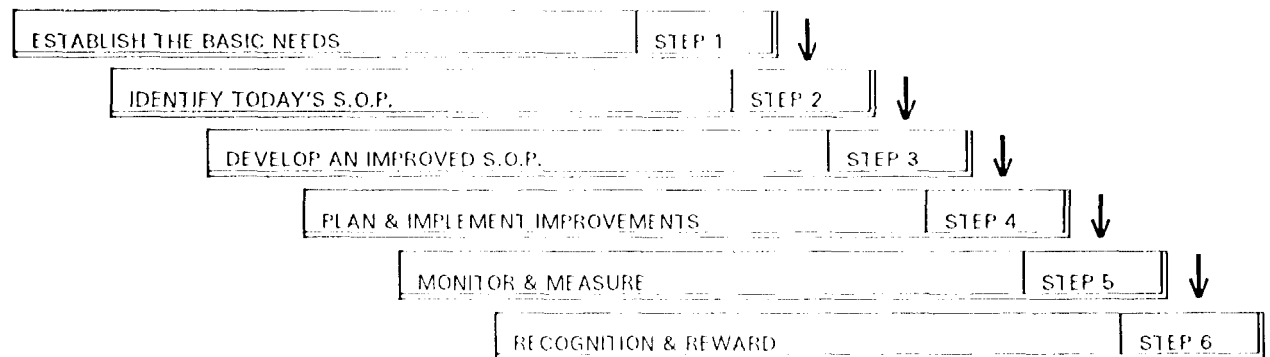

Figure 1 The Six-Step Process

If "the secretary as a member of the team " is a new concept, the six-step process will enable you to accomplish this total team approach. Not all of you will be "starting from scratch. " Many offices have already recognized the sect-cutl-y as a valuable teammate. In this regard, the six-step process may help to identify more subtle areas of improvement.

In either case, or somewhere inbetween, you are encouraged to use this process as a TQM tool in effecting the total team approach.

Identify Today's Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)

[step 1] Begin at the beginning. Quite simply, what are your basic secretarial support needs? When your Secretary was hired there was probably a job description defining, the position. Most often, however, this description focuses on skill requirements and not on the specific kind of basic secretarial support you need. In fact, these needs may never have been clearly established. Often, requirements and expectations are learned on the job, day-by-day, task-by-task, through a series of lengthy trials and errors. Sometimes it isn't until the performance review that the secretary learns where he/she has done well and where he/she has fallen short.

So, assuming, the secretary has the initial necessary skills, you may begin by clearly establishing the basics. Meet with your secretary for a few minutes and develop a simple outline which may be similar to Example 1.

Example 1 Basic Secretarial Needs

- Answering telephones and screening/routing calls
- Sorting and (distributing, mail
- Typing and proofreading reports/memos
- Keeping an appointment calendar
- Booking conference rooms
- Making travel arrangements
- Collecting weekly timecards

Though this brief example is very generic, you may already begin to see how some needs could be overlooked if they haven't been clearly established. For instance., a secretary may, naturally, answer the telephone but may not understand how calls should be screened or possibly re-routed. Mail may be distributed but no sorted as efficiently as possible. While most secretaries will eventually identify these refinements on their own, even the most exlmic.need cannot anticipate every need.

Clear] y established basics dc.fine the mini mum support effort required. It saves time, eliminates errors, and provides the foundation for future improvements.

Identify Today's Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)

[Step 2] in Step 1, we identified the basic secretarial support needs, establishing a foundation for improvement. But before we can implement any change we must clearly recognize how we operat e today. One way to accomplish this is to outline the current standard operating procedure (S01'), or the paradigm that guides us.

The system safety engineer (SS1 $\frac{1}{2}$) or system safety manager (SSM) and the secretary should each compile their own list of SOP guidelines which may resemble Example 2.

Example 2 Today's Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)

- Secretarial personnel are supervised by the SSM/SSE.

- Secretarial support office procedures are defined by the SSM/SSE.

- All tasks are assigned by the SSM/SSE.

- Secretary is provided information on a limited "need to know" basis.

- Only "traditional" secretarial skills are utilized (i. e<, typing, tc.lc.phones, etc.).

- Non-traditional tasks are not assigned (i. e., composition, editing, research, analysis, report compilation, presentation design, etc.).

- Secretary has no internal authority or external signature authority.

- Secretary does not participate in any classes/seminars/conferences.

- Secretary attends staff/project meetings only to take minutes or dots not attend at all.

- Secretary is not included in project/tc.3m awards or other forms of recognition.

After you have prepared you lists, meet together briefly to combine them and create a final outline of Today's SOP. While is will be necessary to compare your input, avoid debating the procedures at this time. Try to stay focused on the [ask, "to identify", and remember that you are coming from two different points of view, perhaps using two slightly different paradigms.

Develop an Improved Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)

| Step |
| 3 |

You have established your basic needs and identified the guidelines by which you currently operate. No doubt, at this stage, possible improvements are beginning to -surface.

Start by reviewing, Today's SOP (Ex. 2). Evaluate each statement and determine the effectiveness of the procedure. Should the current operating procedure remain the same or is an improvement possible? The SSM and the secretary should each prepare their own outline of an improved standard operating procedures as suggested in Example 3.

When you have individually prepared your outline, meet together to develop the improved standard operating procedure.

Example 3 Improved Standard Operating Procedure

Today' SOP	Improved SOP
• Secretarial personnel are supervised by the SSM/SSE.	• Lead secretary supervises support staff and reports to the SSM/SSE.
• Secretarial support office procedures are defined by the SSM/SSE.	• Office support procedures are recommended by secretary and approval by SSM/SSE.
• Tasks are assigned by SSM/SSE.	• Same
• Secretary is provided information on a limited "need to know" basis.	• Secretary is include.d in applicable overview meetings and in memo distribution as a team member.
• Only "traditional" secretarial skills are utilized (i. e., typing, telephones, etc.).	• Secretary's abilities are evaluated to identify all available resources.
• Non-traditional tasks are not assigned (i.e., composition, editing, research, anal ysis, report compilation, presentation design, etc.)	• Non-traditional tasks are assigned according to the secretary's ability and the. system safe.ty staff support requirements.
• Secretary has no internal authority or external signature authority.	• Secretary has supervisory authority over the support staff effort and delegated signature authority internally/e.xternally as appropriate.
• Secretary attends staff/project meetings only to take minutes or does not attend at all.	• Secretary participates in all office staff meetings (and other meetings related to assigned tasks) to facilitate receiving and relaying information.
• Secretary does not participate. in any classes/sc]]lil lars/co]lfcrc]lccs.	• Secretary is encouraged to attend classes/seminars/conferences pertinent to tasks and office technology skills.
• Secretary is not included in project/ team awards or other forms of recognit ion.	• Secretary is recognized as a member of the total team and is rewarded accordingl y.

You may wish to begin by comparing your outline and identifying the improved procedures you agree on. This will encourage a positive team approach. Then identify the procedures where you don't agree and negotiate your different points of view (Ex. 4)

Example 4 Negotiating an Improved SO1'

SSM's View: Secretary answers telephones during our weekly staff meetings so she wouldn't be able to attend. Current SO1' must remain the. same.

Secretary's View: Telephones could be answered by voice mail, an answering machine or forwarded to another office for this brief period each week. Participation in weekly staff meetings will eliminate the need for repeating information the secretary may need and enable him/her to keep abreast of significant issues, input ideas, and plan the support staff effort more effectively. Current SO1' should be improved.

Improved SO1': Following a discussion, the SO1' will be revised to state "Secretary participates in all office staff meetings (and other meetings related to assigned tasks) to facilitate receiving and relaying information." (The specific process of how telephones will be answered will be resolved in Step 4, Planning & Implementing Improvements.)

Granted, all negotiations may not be this simple. However, in instances where you cannot agree or organization policy does not currently permit the optimum improvement, attempt to reach a compromise. Remember, change equals risk! Some improvements may work and some may require further improvements.

As you work through this step, try to avoid debating specific processes or tasks. While. you will need to site examples (as shown in the "Secretary's View", Example 4), these will be more specifically defined in Step 4, Planning & Implementing Improvements. At this stage, examples are used only to illustrate whether or not an improvement is possible..

Conclude your meeting with a new set of guidelines, the Improved Standard Operating Procedure.

Plan & Implement Improvements

Step
4

Now that you 've developed new operating guidelines, it's time to address specific processes and tasks. Where. you have avoided this in previous steps, now you will begin to interpret, plan and implement specific improvements dictated by your Improved SO1' guidelines.

Realizing that all improvements cannot be implemented immediately, you may wish to approach each improve.d SOP one at a time, as individual milestones or goals. You may want to assign

priorities and time schedules for planning and implementing or you may wish a less structured approach. Whatever tactic you choose, it should be one that is comfortable and realistic, enlists input from all staff members, and assures commit ment to reach each of your 1 mproved S01' goals.

Some improvements may be relatively easy to implement such as:

- Secretary participate in office staff meetings (and other meetings related to assigned tasks) to facilitate receiving and relaying information.

in this case, the Secretary begins attending meetings as a team member, presenting and receiving information. Adjustments needed to allow for the Secretary's attendance (telephone coverage, etc.) should be discussed and resolved with little difficulty.

Other improvements may require a little more planning,, such as:

. Office support procedures arc recommended by the secretary and approved by the SSM/SSE.

This improvement may require that the secretary compile a proposal if recommended improvements to current processes (i .c., work order requests required on al l jobs to enable prioritizing assignments; implement voice mail for each SS1 i to reduce receptionist duties, etc.). in this case, each recommendation requires evaluation, planning and implementation.

As you work through each Improved SOP', refer often to the Basic Secretarial Support Needs established in Step 1 (Ex. 1). This will ensure that all basic needs continue to be met yet allow for improvements in how they arc accomplished. The more efficiently basic tasks and processes arc performed, the more time will be available for additional (and, perhaps, non-traditional) support tasks.

The volume of initial improvements required will determine the effort and time commitment necessary to meet your goals. Most of the effort may, naturally, fall to the office. technology professional, the secretary. 1 lowever, the commitment to change must be shard by the. entire staff to ensure success.

Monitor and Measure

[Step 5] As you implement each improvement it will be necessary to monitor its effectiveness and, if necessary, "debug" the proms. Keep in mind that reluctance to change is a natural human response. (for some even more than others). Therefore, an evaluation period is recommended to allow for staff members to, first, adapt to the change and then make recommendations for adjustments to the process. Debugging a process too soon does not allow for the improvement to be fully realized. Yet, ignoring necessary adjustments for very long will only waste time and frustrate staff members.

It is important to note that a total team approach can be vital at this time. Staff members who have not participated planning or have. been reluctant to support the 1 mproved SOP may have valuable input at this stage. 1 iven a "devil's advocate" can be an asset. 1 incourage staff members to hone.stly voice ideas and concerns. 1)ispel any apprehension that and adverse opinion will rc.suit in retribution. Although the SSM and the secretary should make the final decision regarding any secretarial support c. ffort, we must not lose. sight of who we are supporting: the System Safety engineering staff. Working together as a total team should be an important element of each Improved S01' goal.

Measuring the effectiveness of i mprovements is somewhat subjective but may be accomplish in a variet y of ways, A simplified approach to j ust be aware of the increased tasks accomplished by the secretary and the additional time available to the engineering staff (1:x. 6).

Example 6 Simplified Measurement Approach

Current Process: Routine memorandums normally written in long hand by SS1 i/SSM and given to the secretary to type requires approximately 30 minute.s of SS1:/SSM time per day.

1 mproved Process: Secretary composes and types routine memoran dums. SSI:/SSM invests approximatel y 15 minutes pcr day to convey instructions, review/revise. text, and sign the final copy.

Measured
Advantage: Improved process is a savings of 15 minutes per day for the SSI:/SSM. This may be calculated as follows:

15 minutes/day X 5 days/week X 52 weds/yt>ar = 13 hours annually.

Certainly more sophisticated methods of measurement are available and may be found in any number of texts addressing this subject. The method you choose depends on individual needs and organizational require.mcnts. I Iowever, for most, the measurement 01 i mprovement should be evident in increased efficiency and additional support services avai lable.

Recognition & Reward

Steps 1-5 focused on secretarial support procedures, processes and including the secretary as a member 01 the System Safety team. 1 .astly, but certainly not least of all, we will focus on the sec. retary's needs.

As a member of the team, the secretary should be recog.nized and rewarded for contributions in much the same way as the eng.ineering staff. 1 Iowever, recognition and rewai d come in may different forms.

Firstly, reward the secretary with your respect. As an office technology professional, afford your secretary the same respect that you hold for each of your engineering peers. Recognize that the team would be incomplete and at a severe disadvantage without the support effort he/she provides.

Secondly, acknowledge the secretary as a professional. Delegate office technology issues to the secretary and support his/her expertise and judgement in resolving them. Empower your secretary to "do the right things right." Avoid micro-managing his/her responsibilities and tasks.

And, thirdly, promote respect and recognition (internally as well as externally) by example. Demonstrate your confidence and respect by your fictions. Expect others in the organization to do the same.

As the total team leader, System Safety Managers have the responsibility of ensuring that promotions and monetary rewards are granted to the secretary as well as the engineering staff. Be prepared to negotiate with upper management just as you would for your safety engineers. Keep abreast of secretarial salary medians, nationally and within your industry. (You may wish to assign this research project to your secretary.)

Other forms of recognition and rewards are unique to each organization. Although it may require a little creativity, ensure that the secretary is included when recognition and reward is due for a job well done.

Transition

Congratulations! You've worked through the Six-Step Process. An Improved SOP has been developed, improvements are planned and implemented, and you are well on your way toward a more efficient, more productive support effort. But how does the "secretary" become a "System Safety Secretary", a paraprofessional in the System Safety community?

In fact, the foundation for this transition has already been built. The secretary is now a member of the team. As such, he/she attends staff/project meetings, is included in applicable project overviews and is involved in non-traditional tasks that introduce System Safe'ty concerns. These very experiences will enable him/her to learn a great deal about the System Safety effort in organization. Additional steps can be taken to further the secretary's education as suggested in Example 7.

Unlike legal, medical or escrow secretaries, a formal education is not available to train as a System Safety secretary. However, with minimum effort required by the safety engineering staff, the transition from "secretary" to a "System Safety Secretary" is an attainable goal.

The suggestions given in Example 7 are only a few ways to assist the secretary in becoming a System Safety paraprofessional. As System Safety Engineers, you are encouraged to expand the curriculum.

Example 7 Transition Suggestions

- Assist the secretary in compiling a glossary of acronyms common to your organization and the System Safety community.

- Explain frequently used system safety terminology.

- Familiarize the secretary with System Safety SOP's (i.e., hazard reports, waivers, safety surveys, de.).

- Encourage the secretary to ask questions that may not be related to a specific assignment or task.

The Total Quality Management Advantage

The initial Six-Step Process and suggested paraprofessional training integrates your secretary as a vital member of the System Safety [cam. This, in itself, has obvious advantages such as increased staff efficiency and productivity, and appropriate utilization of all available resources, as previous] y discussed. However, a less obvious advantage is also inherent: motivation. What motivates the secretary to work harder?

The answer is simple: human nature. Several recent studies and surveys indicate that employees are motivated more by achievement, empowerment, responsibility and recognition than by salary increases. Motivated employees tend to be loyal and dedicated workers. Organizations that motivate their employees have reduced turnover in staff. And motivation can be contagious! One enthusiastic secretary can motivate the entire team!

The Six-Step Process presented here. is an initial plan, a beginning. Your continued commitment to TQM and the "total team approach" will, no doubt, result in continuous advantages and rewards.

Conclusion

"Doing the right things right" (Ref. 1) is a continuous process. You've included your secretary as a member of the System Safety team. Yet there is more to accomplish.

If your organization has not initiated a Total Quality Management plan, encourage them to do so. Perhaps, by implementing the suggested Six-Step Process, others your organization will recognize your success and follow your example.

Continue to support your secretary 's efforts to grow. Mentoring programs, organizational training classes, conferences, and professional organizations are all avenues for continued

education in office technology as well as the field of System Safety. While the responsibility for professional growth belongs to the secretary, your support is invaluable.

I applaud the System Safety Society for inviting me to present this paper at this conference. As a System Safety Secretary, you have allowed me to participate as a member of your total team. I have been privileged to bring you a "non-traditional" topic which I sincerely hope you will find of value. I encourage the Society to find additional ways to include the System Safety Secretary in future activities. I am also grateful to Jet Propulsion Laboratory and, particular] y, to my System Safety teammates for the unyielding support offered in this endeavor.

I welcome your comments and concerns regarding my presentation. in conclusion, I urge you to continue to "do the right things right"! (Ref. 1)

References

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2. "Quality-Minded, " The Secretary, April 1993, Volume 53, No.4, pp 13, published by Professional Secretaries International®, Kansas City, MO. Professional Secretaries International® and Certified Professional Secretary® arc registered marks, trademarks and service marks of Professional Secretaries International®.

Biography

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With over twenty years of experience in office technology, Suzän Elliott has served as an administrative assistant in medical educational and financial institutions. Formerly self-employed, she provided communication consultant services including public relations presentations, policy and procedure development/documentation, and product/technical brochures for clients in all industries. She is currently the support staff supervisor in the. System Safety Office at Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Pasadena, (California.